

JAMES MARION SIMS

IT IS difficult for the present generation to realize how great an influence Marion Sims exerted upon the surgery of the world. His fame was not sectional. Born in the South, he came to his fullness in New York and crowned his career in Europe by the highest recognition ever given an American surgeon.

A short review of Sims' interesting, all but romantic, life will justify his universal reputation and prove his greatness.

His birthplace was Lancaster County, South Carolina, where he first saw the light on January 25, 1813. The record shows that after attending school and academy he received a degree from his State College in 1832, that he took a year's course at the Charleston Medical School and that he was graduated in medicine at Jefferson Medical College, of Philadelphia, in 1835. Thus equipped he returned to his native place for practice, but within a few months he became discontented and the autumn of the same year found him in Mt. Meigs, Alabama. Here he settled down to the life of an average country doctor. In his autobiography (*The Story of My Life*, 1884) he portrays feelingly the trials of the rural practitioner, and emphasizes, with some show of impatience, the discouragements and failures attendant upon such desultory work. Certainly Sims was not a success as a general family physician. He was restless, ambitious, fired with zeal for doing and finding things, and not satisfied with the humdrum of routine practice. While there are many able men who perform the most useful service in such affairs, Sims was not cut in that mold. He was yet to find his work.

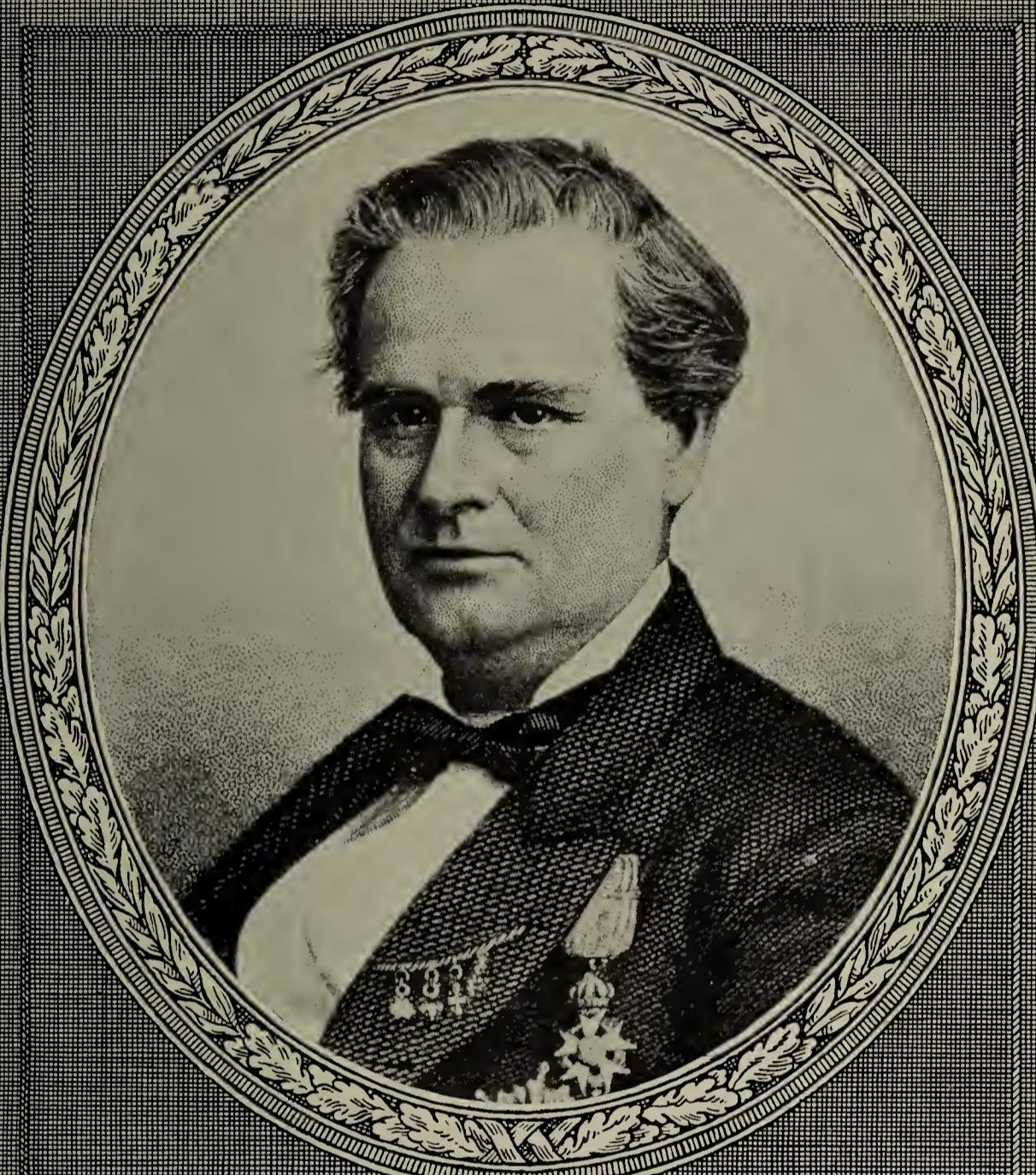
When, following a short engagement in an expedition against the Creek Indians, he moved into Montgomery, Alabama, at the end of the year 1840, he struck his stride. His indomitable energy seized the opportunity to obtain a large surgical practice, and he was soon forced to build a private hospital in a corner of his lot for the accommodation of patients, whose care eventually made him famous. It was in 1849 that he announced his first cured cases of vesicovaginal fistula. The events leading up to this present many features of dramatic interest. From the time of Sims' arrival in Montgomery he performed all sorts of operations in general surgery, such as those times permitted—amputations, harelip and cleft-palate repair, certain eye operations, tenotomies for club foot, and removals of the jaw. The most difficult cases were brought to him. Among the most interesting ones were the vesicovaginal fistulæ, frequent at that time as the result of poor obstetrics, and considered practically incurable. Two apparently insignificant occurrences brought about the first successful result in the repair of these fistulæ after many failures: One was the observation that in the knee-chest

position air will rush in and balloon the vagina as soon as the vulvar orifice is opened, especially when a bent pewter spoon (the first Sims' speculum) was used to retract the perineum; the other was the accidental sight of a spiral brass wire discovered while walking along the street, and suggesting the use of a fine silver wire to close the denuded edges of the fistula. The bent spoon exposed the opening and the silver wire sutures held tight without sloughing—thus were removed two previously insuperable difficulties in the way of relieving these suffering women.

This operation now is so easily performed and the results so uniformly fortunate that we can hardly conceive of the conditions under which Sims worked. Month after month for 4 years he labored to gain access to the site of operation, finally using his speculum in the latero-prone position (since named after him); time after time witnessing the breaking down of the wounds closed with silk sutures; persisting until he was rewarded with success in the case of a colored woman after thirteen successive operations.

Small wonder that under the terrific strain of work, accompanied by anxiety and worry, the body, never very strong, broke down. He was compelled to give up his practice for a time. In 1853, 4 years after his wonderful contribution was given to the world, he resolved to locate in the city of New York, where he might command a larger audience and a wider opportunity for professional service. The usual opposition met by a newcomer was his lot, but after a few years his triumph was complete, resulting as his chief vindication in the founding of the Woman's Hospital, of which Sims was the creator and which now stands as the highest type of this class of institution, a lasting memorial to him. His noble figure in bronze stands in Bryant Park.

Eight years in New York sufficed to spur Marion Sims onward, seeking other worlds to conquer. In 1861, just as the Civil War in this country was beginning, Sims sailed for Paris and asked the eminent surgeons of that city (then the surgical center of the world) for patients that he might demonstrate his method of cure in vesicovaginal fistula. The first of the surgeons he sought was Velpeau, then at the height of his fame, and a pleasing account of the interview is given by E. Souchon, of New Orleans, who was then a medical student in the French capital. Doubt, haughtiness, and cold demeanor marked the Parisian surgeon's manner toward the American claimant, but, with Souchon playing the part of interpreter, after several days a patient was found and operated on by Sims in the presence of masters like Velpeau, Nélaton, Ricord, and Malgaigne and of medical students in large numbers. The result was a perfect cure. Then case after case, both hospital and private patients, came in abundance and, with the exception of two who were near dying under chloroform, nothing happened to mar the continued round of successful operations, most of which were done without any anæsthetic, and all of which resulted in cures. His fame and fortune were made.



JAMES MARION SIMS

1813-1883

From Paris he crossed to London and then back to Germany and Austria and all the European capitals. Later he settled in Paris with his family and lived there for the most part. A few months of each year he spent in New York. On one of these visits home in 1883 he passed away quietly and painlessly in his bed.

Though Marion Sims deservedly has been called the "father of gynecology," for he was the first to devise proper instruments and to invent means of operating successfully in the genital tract of woman, yet he was more than that. He was a competent surgeon in other branches of the art, and many principles established by him have done much to bring surgical science to its present position. He was not the first to suture intestinal wounds, but the rules he laid down in 1881, two years before his death, placed the management of gunshot injuries of the abdomen on the firm basis which it occupies today. Briefly, his rules were that the external wound should be enlarged to ascertain the extent of injuries inflicted; that the wounded intestine should be sutured and bleeding vessels ligated; that diligent search should be made for extravasated matter, faecal or bloody, before closing the cavity; that the surgeon must judge whether to drain or not. While Bobbs, of Indianapolis, preceded Sims by a few months in the removal of gall stones, thus gaining priority, Sims performed the operation independently and is undoubtedly responsible for its adoption as a definite procedure.

No surgeon has achieved so wide distinction and so universal acclaim as Marion Sims. His name and fame were known throughout the civilized world. He was heralded in all the countries of Europe and received decorations from the governments of France, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, and Italy. Through him American surgery was carried to the four corners of the earth, his first and great discovery bringing joy to thousands of wretched women everywhere.

The life and work of Sims should give heart to the young surgeon. By patience, sheer industry and a tenacious purpose he rose from an obscure existence in a remote country district to be the most renowned figure in the surgical profession, loved and honored at home and abroad. To take infinite pains; to develop the capacity for hard work; to keep everlastingly at it; to do one thing well; not merely to win success, but to deserve it—these are attributes of genius. And James Marion Sims was the surgical genius of his age.

HUBERT A. ROYSTER.

